

# 'Free to Be . . . You and Me'

By DEBORAH JOWITT

**S**OCIETY is constantly doing ideological backflips on the subject of male-female roles. When I was a child, I was encouraged to believe that I could be anything I was strong enough or smart enough to be. On the other hand, I was also told that any potential husband who saw me bending over to drink straight from the cold water tap, instead of using a glass, would immediately wonder whether I was the right girl for him.

The new children's record, *Free to Be . . . You and Me* (Bell 1110), made by Marlo Thomas and a number of illustrious show biz pals, sweetly but persistently plinks out the happy message that biological sex need not determine careers, tastes, skills or personalities. Dick Cavett's dog is a plumber, but also enjoys messing around with a toy stove and little pots and pans. Marlo Thomas sings of a Jill and a Bill who celebrate their friendship, first by baking a cake together, then by going fishing. Alan Alda and Thomas belt out a number about William wanting a doll (it's okay, his grandma explains to his unsympathetic parents: it's practice for being a father). Rosey Grier croons softly that little boys have to cry too.

"Free to Be . . . You and Me" slides along easily with a mixture of poems, stories, dialogues and songs. Most of

these are fine, and of course, expertly rendered. The title song, written by Stephen Laurence and Bruce Hart and sung by the New Seekers, has a bouncing folk-rock sound with a good boomy bass, and Laurence (with Shelly Miller) has also made a warm, pretty song that goes well with Diana Ross's warm, pretty voice. It's called "When We Grow Up," and the refrain is:

*Well I don't care if I'm  
pretty at all  
And I don't care if you never  
get tall  
I like what I look like and  
you're nice small  
We don't have to change  
at all.*

Another song, "Girl Land," sung by Shirley Jones and Jack Cassidy has a myster-

ious, rather sinister air that contrasts interestingly with the sunniness of most of the other numbers. Against the sounds of an eerie callope, Cassidy cries out like a nightmarish carnival bark-er, "You go in a girl, and you never come out!"

The longest cut is a new sexes-lib variation on the story of Atalanta and her famous race, and it's told in sure-winner fairy tale style. Children should like it, even if the ending is surprising compared with works by Perreault, the Brothers Grimm, or Hans C. Andersen; and I think they'll love "Ladies First," delivered by Marlo Thomas in a voice so deliciously smug that just listening to the sound of it makes my palms itch. The lady in question, a curly, lacy, helpless chick, meets a highly satisfying end when a group of hungry tigers decides that "ladies first" is fine with them. ("I am a tender sweet young thing." "Oh, far out," said the Tiger Chief.") Also, on the record there are enough catchy tunes and hearty rhymes — like "Zachary Zugg took out the rug"—to appeal to small children's love of predictable rhythms and patterns.

"Free to Be . . . You and Me" has obviously been put together with thought, integrity and skill. It's diverting, and I applaud its message. I do feel, though, that on two counts, it may cause slight confusion. Those who made the record stress so

clearly and so often that a person's sex should make absolutely no difference as to how he/she conducts his/her life, that a child might — I'm serious—wonder why we have two sexes at all. Yet, in the funny and sophisticated skit, "Boy Meets Girl," Mel Brooks and Marlo Thomas play a couple of newborn babies who are having an absurd Socratic dialogue in an effort to discover which sex each belongs to. It's not that they'd prefer being girls

or boys, but they're wild to know. Also in the slightly cloying song, "Parents are People," when Marlo Thomas has finished singing about all the things "mommies can be," Harry Belafonte says in that husky, knowing voice, "They can't be grandfathers . . . or daddies . . ." Why the hell not, one wonders. (Later she is equally firm on the point that fathers can't be grandmothers or mothers.)

The monologue, "Housework" by Sheldon Harnick, which Carol Channing coos expertly, may require paren-

tal clarification too. The poem is cast in the rapid, cozy rhythms of "The Night Before Christmas." After taking a good poke at the happy homemakers of TV commercials—"That lady is smiling because she's an actress, and she's earning money . . ."—Channing goes on to say emphatically that all real people hate housework, and the only way of making it bearable is to have husband and wife share the chores.

Well, I think the togetherness bit is fine. (And why limit it to the adults in the family?) Cleaning up and hosing down are necessary proc-

esses, in many jobs as well as in life—that is, if we're not going to drown in our own detritus. The skit, unintentionally, I'm sure, de-means those who accept the clean-up chores without fuss, and makes those who take pleasure in such chores sound like real suckers.

Overly conscientious carping, maybe. Especially considering the high quality of this record. The creators and performers—I couldn't mention all of them—deserve the gratitude of liberated parents. The children will be too busy enjoying themselves to say thank you to anyone.



Alix Jeffry  
Marlo Thomas  
"A happy message"

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